Minneapolis and Brittany:
A Cultural Exchange Revisited

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In 1996, Learning Languages published an article describing a cultural exchange that occurred from 1991 to 1993 between Breck School, a private school in Minneapolis, and Paul Dukas School, a high-needs school in Brest, France. Much of that exchange was carried out through online telecommunications using the Minitel*. The result of a two-year communication exchange was the production and presentation of a student-written multicultural play. Students from Paul Dukas School in France visited Minneapolis to present the play with American Breck students. The article concluded: "it should be stressed that Bardy and Malgorn (the teachers involved) spent an extraordinary amount of personal time and energy from their first debate about whether to begin an exchange between students of such diverse backgrounds to the final production of the bilingual multicultural play. They created an international classroom that encouraged student communication in the target language. They nurtured in their students an appreciation of differences and similarities for other cultures." Technology was the vehicle for students' communication, but it was the pedagogy that successfully transformed communication into a viable and effective learning environment.

When the editor of *Learning Languages* requested a follow-up to this article, a first concern was how to contact the two teachers who were the focus of the original article: Mireille Bardy, the French teacher at Breck School in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Michel Malgorn, the English teacher at Paul Dukas School in Brest, France. "Googling" produced a phone number that led to Bardy and an e-mail address that led to Malgorn. I include in this article, therefore, a summary of my conversation with Mireille Bardy and excerpts from the e-mail received from Michel Malgorn. I also include reference to how pedagogy supports communication and how appropriate use of technology can increase student learning. I conclude with links to several online collaboration resources available today to teachers who would like to explore the possibility of creating their own international classrooms.

Renewed Communication with the Teachers

Telephone Conversation with Mireille Bardy

Bardy left teaching in the foreign language classroom several years ago and is currently working in mental health care.

How did this experience affect your students?

Bardy: Several students continued with French that would

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* The term *Minitel* originated as the name of a computer terminal used to access French data services. Minitel now represents the services in videotext format that are accessed. This form of telecommunications requires a computer, a modem, and telecommunications software or a Minitel terminal. The user has access to on-screen information by a variety of services.

not have otherwise. The experience opened students' eyes to how the world lives differently and shaped their views of the world around them

Were your students able to visit Paul Dukas students in France?

Many of the students who participated in the exchange visited Brest, France, during their senior year in high school, four years later. When they arrived in Brest, the students were welcomed with a reception at the city courthouse. They also met Michel Malgorn, his colleagues and many of the students who had visited them in Minneapolis. Unfortunately the magic of the experience in Minneapolis was not recreated. When the French students visited Minneapolis, they were able to leave behind their different socio-economic background and differences in culture. In Minneapolis Brest students, many of them Arabs, were accepted for themselves, as children from a foreign country, not "lab kids," underprivileged students. At that time, differences between the two groups of students was not as evident. However, when Breck students, most from wealthy highly educated families, visited Brest, the gap between their different cultures was more evident than it had been four years before and caused an awkwardness that hadn't existed before. Brest students dealt with a day-to-day violence unfamiliar to Breck students. Because of Brest students' high poverty level, Minneapolis students were housed with families other than those of the students who visited them. Therefore their visit resembled more that of a student exchange opportunity than former friends meeting again.

Do you think today's technologies better enable exchanges such as yours?

Bardy: Technology is being used in schools as a communication tool, one that provides global access. However, the power of e-mail and other communication venues are not available to all students. All students do not have access to the collaboration and communication possibilities that technology can support. All children should have the opportunity to reach out to other children and space in which to express and experiment with ideas. In the twelve years since the exchange between the two schools our country has not solved the problem of the widening technological gap between the haves and have-nots. In today's political environment, one that is becoming more violent, an exchange like the one they experienced might not be possible.

E-mail Exchange with Michel Malgorn

Michel Malgorn, like Bardy, is currently working in the mental health profession. He is working with psychotic and autistic children.

Describe how you believe your students grew linguistically during the exchange.

Malgorn: Students who started with writing only a few words of English scattered in French sentences ended up with full sentences in basic English, including French words for unknown specialized vocabulary or U.S. cultural notions.

Describe preparations for the trip to Minneapolis.

Malgorn: It required a tremendous amount of work and financial responsibilities, trip costs, funding the passports for all students and visas for the students, mostly young Arabs, close in time to the first Gulf War.

Do you know how this exchange impacted your students in the future?

Malgorn: One student, a young girl, went back twice to Minneapolis to take drama courses in the summer. Others showed an unusually strong fluency in English in secondary school.

How did the exchange affect your professional life?

Malgorn: I left Paul Dukas Primary and took a sabbatical year during which I attended courses at Brest University College. There, I wrote a master's degree [thesis] in linguistics on the theme: "Communication Technologies and Second Language Acquisition."

Did you replicate the communication exchange with other classes?

Malgorn: A couple of years later, a new class, younger children, communicated via fax with a special education class in the city of Brest, exchanging news, experiments, feelings, math problems and so on. This experience was replicated with special needs students who communicated by internet with another special needs class in the center of France. Results of a study of this exchange showed that the majority of the 12 students involved improved their writing skills. Students who wrote to someone they knew (a penpal's face on a digital picture) had more incentive to write and were motivated to express themselves in written words. The more they wrote, the more they became expert in writing and spelling. Self-esteem and constructive feedback (with the teacher as a helper) were at work all the time. These experiences fostered the relationship and confidence between teacher and students in the classroom.

The Power of Technology in the Classroom

It is important to remember that the technology used in 1991 was Minitel. The online exchange between the two teachers and their students occurred before "e-mail" was an everyday word, before every classroom had at least one computer, and before the universal use of the internet. The common communication channel at that time was a phone line and a 12- or 24-baud modem and a fax machine.

In the ten years since the article was published, considerable research has been done on brain-based, or the cognitive approach to learning. *How People Learn* (Bransford, 1999), an important resource in this area, describes how the use of technology by teachers and students can affect student learning.

Technology in the classroom can:

- Bring exciting curricula based on real-world problems into the classroom;
- Provide scaffolds and tools to enhance learning;
- Give students and teachers more opportunities for feedback, reflection, and revision;
- Build local and global communities that include teachers, administrators, students, parents, practicing scientists and other interested people; and
- Expand opportunities for teacher learning.

Reflecting on the project, the information exchange and the play created with collaboration between two classes, it is obvious why the experience was successful both in motivating students and in improving their general language skills. This project meets all five criteria for effective use of technology in the classroom:

Bring exciting curricula based on real-world problems into the classroom

The subject of the children's play was directly based on real-life problems that the Brest students faced being immigrants in a new country. Minneapolis students needed to know about their local history to complete the project. Students also needed to know how to construct and present a play

for a bilingual audience and plan for visitors from another country.

Provide scaffolds and tools to enhance learning

The initial goal of the project was communication in the target language. The Minitel provided teachers and students an efficient means to exchange information. Minitel provided them online synchronous communication that enabled them to nurture relationships between the two classes

Give students and teachers more opportunities for feedback, reflection, and revision

The ability to easily share information over electronic connections, fax, e-mail, and synchronous chat, provided students and teachers with a creative environment where they were able to build their play together.

Build local and global communities that include teachers, administrators, students, parents, practicing scientists and other interested people

The project created a global community shared by students from the U.S. and France, their teachers, their parents and their schools.

Expand opportunities for teacher learning

The comments above from Mireille Bardy and Michel Malgorn are evidence of the teacher learning offered by the exchange experience.

The success of the project did not depend on sophisticated technology. Technologies required of this project were video, fax, e-mail, and an online chat environment. A project like this could be easily replicated in schools today that have the most basic e-mail service.

Conclusion

One of the powerful aspects of this exchange was its focus on direct communication. A communicative approach to language learning motivates the student to use the target language in a meaningful way.

Today, it is much easier to access the technology to replicate an exchange like the one between Breck and Paul Dukas schools, but as described in *How People Learn (1999)*, technology is only a vehicle that provides teachers tools they need to expand a student's world. The power of the tool lies in how the tool is used in the classroom and the lesson design that encourages student interaction.

References

Bransford, J., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.). (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school: Expanded edition*. Retrieved September 14, 2005, from http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1/

Resources for Student Exchanges

Ten to twelve years ago, finding a school with which to create an exchange was difficult. Today, it is much easier. There are several organizations that support high-quality collaboration environments. They include the following:

Northwestern University Collaborative Project (http://collaboratory. nunet.net) provides project consulting, training, technical advice, and Web-based resources and services to K–12 teachers and their students who are interested in using internet technologies to advance education.

The Global Schoolhouse (www.gsh. org), sponsored by Microsoft, links kids around the world, creating a "connected" learning community. The site includes educational resources that are available to parents and teachers, while kids and teens are exposed to contests, online publications and cyberfairs that have been created just for them. Schools can register themselves at this site, and technology planners can find examples of schools that use technology effectively when searching for ways to improve the technology implementation process at their own school.

ThinkQuest (www.thinkquest.org) is an international student competition sponsored by the Oracle Education Foundation. Teams of students and teachers are challenged to create websites on educational topics and compete for exciting prizes. The completed websites are published in the ThinkQuest Library, a rich learning resource used by millions. Many projects have been developed by collaborative teams from different countries.

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